



State Representative **HELEN SOMMERS**

2005 Session Report



“I CAN’T GO HOME WITHOUT MONEY FOR THE VIADUCT”

Funding for major transportation improvements, and especially a fix for the shaky Alaskan Way Viaduct, was an absolute must for me. The approval came on the very last day of the 105-day session. \$2 billion dollars will be allocated to the Viaduct. A rebuild will cost \$2.3 billion, a tunnel may be one billion more, plus costs for a new seawall. Additional help is expected from a regional

proposal, maybe the federal government, and the city. This major commitment from the state jump-starts the planning, analysis and engineering required. Funding comes from an increase in the gas tax and weight fees.

The total transportation package is \$8.5 billion, funded by 9.5 cent gas tax increase phased in over four years.

Other major transportation investments in King County include strengthening the 520 bridge across Lake Washington and expanding state route 405 on the east side of the Lake. These projects, and others around the state, will provide jobs and a boost to the state’s economy.



ELECTION REFORM – SEVERAL ADVANCES, ONE BIG FAILURE

The troubled November election drove a major review of our election procedures and resulted in a package of reform legislation.

- By 2006 electronic voting machines must produce a paper audit trail.
- The Secretary of State must update registration lists quarterly, by checking for changes of residence, felons, multiple registrations, and deaths.
- Information will be improved for out-of-state, overseas and service voters. Large counties are to count ballots daily.
- Identification will be required of poll voters, ranging from a driver’s license to a student ID card, to a utility bill.
- Counties will be permitted to go to all mail voting. Several counties already do so – including Clallam and Skamania.



OUR SEPTEMBER PRIMARY

The Secretary of State made clear that an earlier primary election was the most important reform, allowing more time for recounts, ascertaining the winners in close races, and timely mailing of general election ballots to military and overseas voters. Most states have earlier primaries, many in June.

The House passed a bill to move the primary to August, but the bill died in the Senate.

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THE STATE BUDGET AND INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

As chair of the Appropriations Committee in the House, and lead on the two-year operating budget, I am pleased with the Legislature's support for education. The 2005-07 budget funds the two K-12 initiatives recently passed by the voters – mandating smaller classes and raises for teachers, but unfortunately not including additional revenue.

The budget also makes important new investments in higher education – recognizing the greater demand from more high school graduates and the critical need to prepare our workforce for the emerging economy. A total of 7,900 new enrollments will be provided at the community colleges and our universities. A big increase in student aid was funded, estimated to provide financial assistance to an additional 10,000 students – helping to offset increases in tuition.

The Puget Sound area needs more opportunities for four-year degrees. The University of Washington has to turn away thousands of qualified applicants each year. Next year, the UW branches at Bothell and Tacoma will begin to offer lower division classes linked to their existing upper division programs – providing more bachelor degree opportunities under one administration.

LIFE SCIENCES AND RESEARCH

Governor Gregoire proposed legislation to enhance Washington's leadership in bioscience research. A portion of the tobacco settlement will be used as seed money for research in genetics, disease, early detection and more. (Then-Attorney General Gregoire was a national leader in that tobacco settlement litigation.)

Work done by the University of Washington and Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center has already attracted nationally-recognized researchers and started a bioscience industry. This new investment should help keep Washington a leading center for this research-based industry.



SPECIAL FOCUS ON EARLY LEARNING AND THE INFANT BRAIN

Researchers at the University of Washington (Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences) have been telling us for years that learning and imitation begin from birth. The infant brain is hard at work. Sounds, vocalizing, the number of words – all are important. And read and read to the child, the experts say.

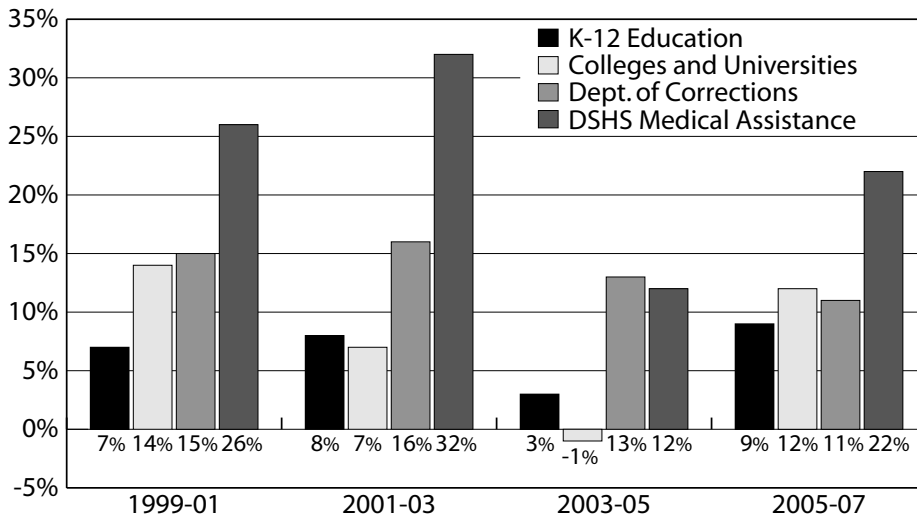
Several school districts, especially Kennewick, have made big gains in the reading level of their students by following that advice. Kennewick focuses very strongly on reading as the ticket to all fields of learning. The school district is a leader in the effective use of a non-profit Reading Foundation.



The Reading Foundation is dedicated to reaching the community, and especially new parents, about reading to the child. Their motto is: READ TO THE CHILD, EVERY CHILD, TWENTY MINUTES A DAY, EVERY DAY, FROM BIRTH. They visit new parents, provide coaching and books. They use billboards, bus messages, and public service ads. This dedicated community effort has been vigorously implementing the best research evidence – the infant brain thrives on language.

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State Spending Growth Change from Previous Biennium



BIGGEST BUDGET CHALLENGE – HEALTH CARE COSTS JUMP 21.5%

The PacMan of the budget is the uncontrollable cost of health care. The state provides care for over 900,000 low income adults and children through Medicaid – a joint federal-state program, funded 50-50 by each. The state costs of this program for the coming biennium jumped by 21.5% – far greater than the estimated 7.1% growth in revenues. Increases in cigarette and estate taxes provide revenue growth totaling 9.7% – still way below health cost increases. Almost every state is struggling with similar challenges. The graph shows a comparison of increases in major expenditure areas over four biennia.

STATE'S BUYING POWER AND EXPERTISE EXTENDED

The state is a big buyer of prescription drugs. All agencies now participate in an evidence-based purchasing program, including a list of preferred drugs. "Evidence-based" is the popular jargon meaning that the medication must have been proven to be effective – actually work as claimed.



The state Health Care Authority will establish a drug purchasing consortium to extend the benefits of large-group buying power and the research on effective drugs to others: local government, private entities, labor organizations and individuals may now join the consortium.

KIDS COME FIRST

Recent tragedies, resulting in the death of several children under the care of the state's Division of Children and Family Services, drove needed focus and funding for stronger prevention measures and enhanced child welfare services. The Governor changed management at the Children's Administration, and got legislative support for funding additional staff. This will ensure investigation of emergent abuse cases within 24 hours, and provide monthly contact with every family.

My seatmate, Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson, chairs the Juvenile Justice and Family Law Committee. She sponsored a bill to strengthen state tracking of reports of child neglect. These cases can develop into more serious abuse – which early detection can prevent.

Health care for all children in the state was expanded. Children of immigrant parents (not eligible for the federal-state Medicaid program) will be covered under a state funded alternative, estimated to extend coverage from about 3,000 to 8,500 children.



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A NEW STATE SYMBOL

The orca is now the official state marine mammal – thanks to a civics project initiated two years ago in an Oak Harbor classroom. The orca joins many other official symbols of Washington state:

- **State Fish** - Steelhead trout
- **State Bird** - American goldfinch
- **State Insect** - Green Darner dragonfly
- **State Tree** - Western hemlock
- **State Fruit** - Apple
- **State Flower** - Coast rhododendron
- **State Gem** - Petrified wood
- **State Fossil** - Columbian mammoth



GREEN WASHINGTON

The session resulted in two significant advances for the environment. Washington becomes the first state to require new public buildings to meet higher “green” standards – for energy efficiency and water conservation. We also followed California’s lead and adopted tougher emissions standards for new vehicles, starting for some 2009 models. Additionally, we provided funding for a long overdue cleanup of the Hood Canal.



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